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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 001456

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/PMBS

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SUBJECT: GRP GEARS UP FOR MILF TALKS, POSSIBLE DESIGNATION OF MILF ELEMENTS

REF: 04 MANILA 6120

Classified By: Pol/C Scott Bellard, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) Summary. The next GRP/MILF talks will take place in Kuala Lumpur April 16-18. The GRP remains optimistic about a peace accord "this year," in part based on a recent friendly meeting in Maguindanao between the head of the GRP panel and MILF Chairman Murad that the Malaysians set up. Cooperation against criminals under an Ad Hoc Joint Action Group is off to a good start. Designation of certain MILF elements as terrorists could be useful to the peace process, especially as Chairman Murad and the MILF leadership may have reached a "tipping point" on the road toward peace. The GRP welcomes upcoming US Institute of Peace seminars on ancestral domain, and believes Chairman Murad does as well, but would also like to see USIP focus on MILF capacity building for governance and the establishment of a full-time on the ground USIP presence in the Philippines. End Summary.

Setting the stage for talks

2. (C) According to Secretary Silvestre C. Afable, head of the GRP panel to the GRP-MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front) peace panel and Malacanang Palace's Communications Director, the GRP is ready with a "definite presentation" blessed by the National Security Council on March 28 for the next round of "informal talks" with the MILF, which will take place in Kuala Lumpur April 16-18. He also described his unprecedented March 18 direct (but informal) talks in Maguindanao with MILF Chairman Murad and confirmed that Datu Othman bin Abd Razak of Malaysia's Office of the Prime Minister had arranged the meeting and had accompanied him.

3. (C) Afable said that he had found Murad in "good spirits" and "congenial." After the two sides agreed on the dates for the talks, Murad explained that he would need afterward to convene "community gatherings" in Maguindanao to discuss the results and seek support. Murad asked that the GRP not impede such movements of people. Afable promised Murad that the GRP would support such consultations, as long as these were not movements by armed insurgents.

Guarded optimism

4. (C) Afable said that he no longer believed a peace accord was possible by June, but still predicted success "this year." He claimed that Chairman Murad had also expressed confidence in the peace process. Afable admitted that "differences remain" on ancestral domain, and added that he had not engaged in substantive discussions with Murad on this during their recent talk. He highlighted welcome progress in the Ad Hoc Joint Action Group (AHJAG) against criminals and terrorists (reftel), explaining that the GRP had already shared a wanted list of thirteen Indonesians and forty Filipinos against whom the GRP planned to act. Under this agreement, the GRP does not need prior coordination with the MILF before moving against these wanted individuals. He said that there had already been two cases of arrests (kidnappers and carnappers) in which the MILF had actually assisted the GRP security forces in blocking the flight of the criminals, enabling their capture. Afable admitted that he had raised the issue of MILF/Jemaah Islamiyah cooperation only "peripherally," with Murad expressing a clear desire to work through the AHJAG to handle all "troublemakers."

5. (C) Afable speculated that Murad -- and the MILF -- may have reached a "threshold" or a "tipping point" that would permit signing of a peace agreement at long last. He claimed that this year's fighting on Jolo Island by the Misuari Breakaway Group of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) seems to have heightened the MILF's awareness that steps toward peace were essential now in order to prevent a breakdown into anarchy and infiltration by the Abu Sayyaf Group and other terrorist elements. He said that Murad had even expressed a willingness for the MILF eventually to be involved in a Jolo peace process if the GRP set up a "group of wise men" composed of community elders and NGO representatives. Afable advised him that, at this point the GRP's preferred solution was still to pursue military action against the MBG on Jolo.

16. (C) Afable claimed that the MILF appeared ready to work through the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) government in an eventual peace accord, and that earlier objections may be dissipating due to "pressure" from local communities to end the insurgency. He said that the MILF definitely had not raised the abolishment or alteration of the ARMM in talks with the GRP. He described GRP thinking of a new GRP "Special Authority" to handle ancestral domain issues and subsequent development issues, although he expressed a belief that existing Philippine legislation on rights of indigenous peoples would suffice to address MILF demands for mineral and land rights, local autonomy, etc. He welcomed what he described as a younger generation of MILF cadres who were "earnest" and eager to pursue developmental goals instead of fighting.

Terrorist Designations

17. (C) Pol/C described initial USG thinking -- in coordination with the GRP -- about possible formal designation of elements of the MILF as terrorists, on which the media had reported following EAP A/S-designate Hill's visit to Manila. After reflection, Afable commented that "maybe the time is ripe" for such a step and that "designation might be good" for the peace talks. He admitted that the GRP still did not fully understand internal MILF dynamics and whether such a step would strengthen or weaken Murad in the MILF Central Committee. He nonetheless opined that it could actually help him if the evidence against individual MILF leaders was sufficiently strong to warrant terrorist designation. Pol/C promised that the USG would cooperate with the GRP in developing such a list.

USIP role

18. (C) Afable welcomed USIP's planned April seminar on ancestral domain, and claimed that Murad had also "seemed to like the idea." He added, however, that both sides had already formulated their positions on ancestral domain. He expressed interest in an expansion of USIP's mandate to include capacity building and governance training for the MILF, similar to USAID-funded programs for ARMM officials provided by the Asian Institute of Management (AIM). He noted, however, that USIP remained limited in what it could do here in the absence of a full-time presence on the ground in the Philippines.

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